

## THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY AT ASINOU, CYPRUS. A REPORT ON THE SEASONS OF 1965 AND 1966

DAVID C. WINFIELD AND ERNEST J. W. HAWKINS

THE Church of the Panagia Phorviotissa at Asinou<sup>1</sup> lies in the eastern foothills of the Troodos mountains about three miles above the village of Nikitari, in the diocese of Kyrenia. With the kind permission and cooperation of the Bishop of Kyrenia and of the Department of Antiquities, a Dumbarton Oaks expedition began work on the cleaning and preservation of the paintings on the walls of the church in March 1965. The work has been under the alternate direction of Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Winfield, aided by Mrs. Winfield, Mr. Tsourtas, lent from the Department of Antiquities' staff, Mr. Zaferiades of the Dumbarton Oaks staff, and latterly by Mr. Macrides, also of the Dumbarton Oaks staff. We owe a particular debt of thanks for his help to the Director of Antiquities, Dr. Karageorgis, and to the Curator of Monuments, Mr. Papageorghiou, for his collaboration in lending to us the services of Mr. Tsourtas and in the loan of scaffolding.

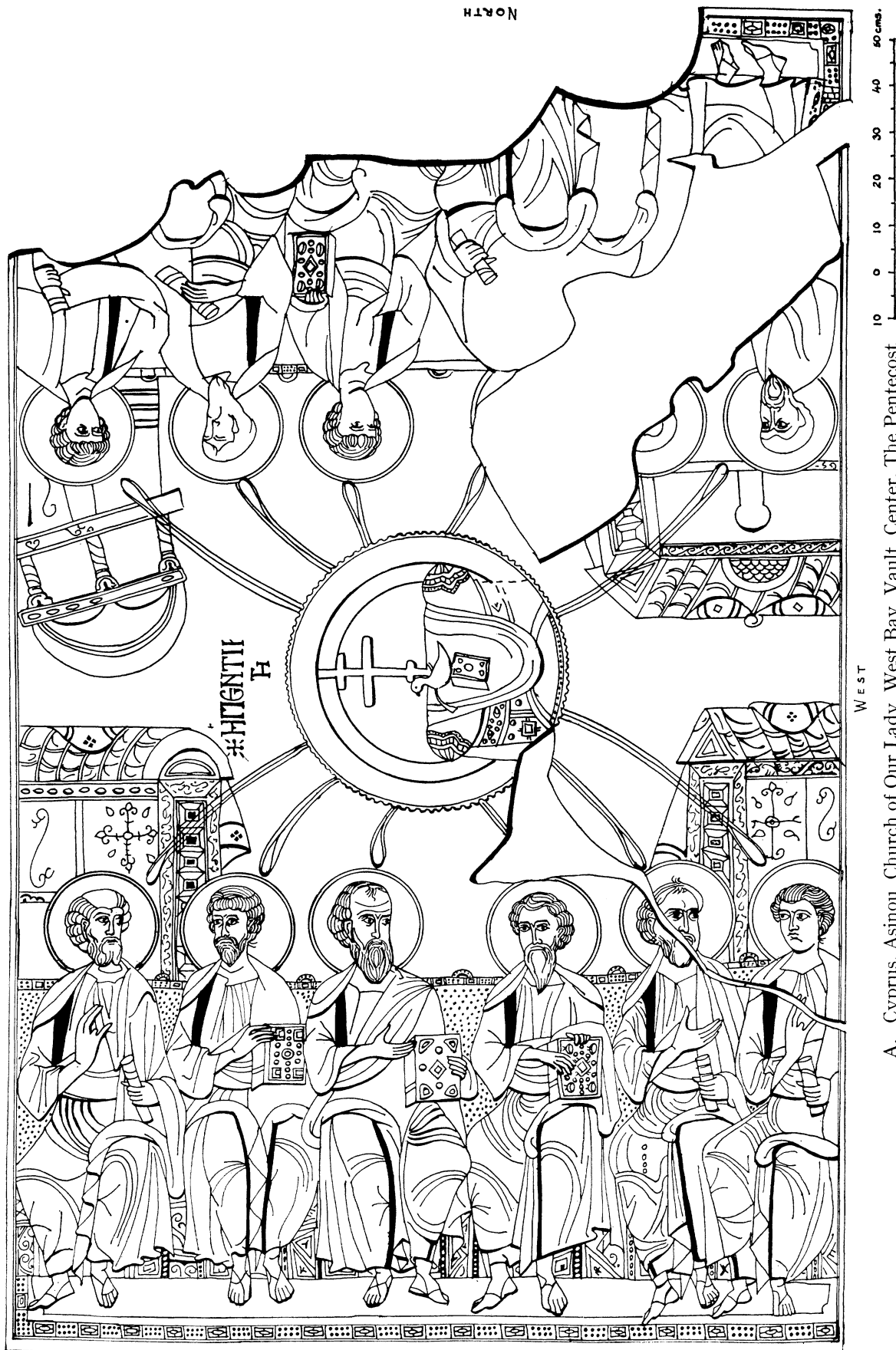
The twelfth-century church of Asinou (fig. 1 and text fig. B) consisted of a single nave with rounded apse and three blind arches on the north and south walls, divided by

pilasters carrying transverse ribs which supported a waggon vault. The walls and ribs appear to have been inadequate as a support for the vault and at a period unknown, the vault cracked and dropped by several centimeters at the center. To reinforce the structure buttresses were added externally, the two internal transverse ribs and the facing of the arch of the conch were considerably strengthened and given pointed arches. Also at some time subsequent to the original structure the narthex, with rounded apses to the north and south and cupola depending on pendentives, was added to the church.

It was decided to begin work in the western bay of the nave where Mr. Hawkins had been responsible some years previously for the cleaning of a small portion of the Koimesis on the west wall.<sup>2</sup> The paintings of the western bay were cleaned during the 1965 season, and those of the eastern bay and of the apse during the 1966 season. In both areas the paintings were thickly covered with soot from burning candles and oil lamps, and by splashes of oil from sputtering lamps. The oil was particularly difficult of removal since it had soaked into the pigments and plaster, binding in with itself particles of soot and other dirt; in these circumstances it was decided to underclean the paintings and leave a certain amount of dirt on them, rather than to overclean and run the risk of losing original paint. The cleaning was carried out with a mixture of ammonia, alcohol, acetone, liquid soap, and water; these ingredients were used in varying concentration according to the condition of the area under treatment, and it was found that the film of dirt eventually softened sufficiently to permit of its removal with soft brushes. Where necessary, and where the condition of

<sup>1</sup> The fullest account of the church and its paintings is still: The Right Reverend, the Bishop of Gibraltar, Major V. Seymer, Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Buckler, "The Church of Asinou, Cyprus, and its Frescoes," *Archaeologia*, 83 (1934), pp. 327-350. A more up-to-date account which records some of the paintings uncovered during the restoration of the fabric is: A. and J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus* (Cyprus, 1964), pp. 51-67. A short up-to-date account also appears in: A. Papageorghiou, *Masterpieces of the Byzantine Art of Cyprus* (Nicosia, 1965), pp. 15, 17, figs. 10-13. The latest account confines itself to a detailed iconographic study of the twelfth-century paintings: Marina Sacopoulo, *Asinou en 1106* (Brussels, 1966). This account is incomplete since Mrs. Sacopoulo was describing them before they were cleaned. She will, however, be publishing an addenda to her book, with corrections.

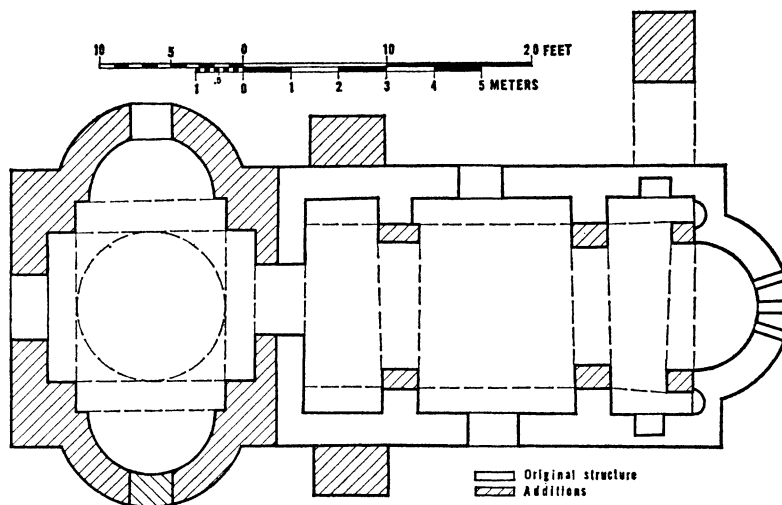
<sup>2</sup> A. H. S. Megaw, A. Stylianou, *Cyprus Mosaics and Frescoes* (New York, 1963), figs. 8-11.



A. Cyprus, Asinou, Church of Our Lady, West Bay, Vault, Center. The Pentecost

the pigments permitted the use of it, a fine grade of dental pumice powder was used as an abrasive for the removal of dirt. Carbon tetrachloride and oil of turpentine were also used as softening agents, the latter being useful in the softening of beeswax which had dripped from lighted candles stuck onto the paintings themselves; a practice which it is

register are the figures of six standing saints of about life size; these are from south to north: Andronikos, Hilarion, Kyriakos, Anthony, Euphemios and Sabbas. In the north blind arch are the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste with the guard and deserter on the sides, one more standing figure, St. Nikitas, and Christ with angels distributing crowns from



B. Cyprus, Asinou, Church of Our Lady. Ground Plan

hoped will now be abandoned. Where pigments were not firmly attached to the wall, they were treated with repeated coatings of polyvinyl acetate emulsion applied in a very watery solution.

The paintings in the west bay<sup>3</sup> comprise a Pentecost scene in the center of the vault (text fig. A), flanked on the north side by the Washing of the Feet and on the south side by the Raising of Lazarus (fig. 2). On the west wall in the upper register, on a level with the aforementioned scenes, are the Entry into Jerusalem (figs. 3, 4) and the Last Supper (figs. 5, 6). In the middle register is the Koimesis (fig. 7) and in the ground

the soffit above (figs. 8, 9). In the south blind arch, on the soffit, are roundels of four bust-length figures: SS. Lavros, Floros, Sergios, and Bacchos (figs. 10, 11). On the south wall, in the lunette, are half-length figures of SS. Constantine and Helena (fig. 12); beneath them in the red border is the dated inscription, and below this in the ground register are three more standing figures: SS. Theodosius the Coenobite, Arsenios, and Ephraim the Syrian, with a further figure, St. Thekla, in the side of the arch.

The four scenes in the west bay are the same size as those of the central vault of the church which probably date from the fourteenth century. It can therefore be assumed that the later paintings are copies of the twelfth-century scenes, and that the original decoration comprised a cycle of the Twelve Feasts, together with additional scenes in the vaults over the east and west bays and on the north wall of the center bay.

<sup>3</sup> What follows is intended only as a brief iconographic record of the paintings that we have worked upon, and as a supplement to the catalogue in the *Archaeologia* article referred to above. The additional material has also been recorded by Mrs. Sacopoulo, whose book unfortunately came to hand too late for the inclusion in this report of a detailed consideration of it.


To the *Archaeologia* catalogue may provisionally be added the four Evangelists who occupied the four spandrels between the blind arches on the north and south walls. These spandrels are largely blocked by the later reinforcing arches built up against them, as can be seen by reference to the ground plan, but a portion of the late masonry was removed from the front of the southwest spandrel, revealing the name John, part of a halo, parts of a chair, and a piece of architecture. In the three remaining spandrels no names are visible, but pieces of architecture and of the backs of chairs suggest that a seated figure was represented in each spandrel.

In the east bay a damaged scene of the Ascension occupies the vault, and the scene is partially covered by the later extension and reinforcement of the conch which has concealed two apostles on the south side and three apostles on the north side. On the north wall of the north blind arch is the Birth of the Virgin, and on the south wall of the south arch the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Both of these scenes have suffered from prolonged water seepage, which brought with it harmful salts from the decaying mortar of the wall, and this has resulted in the partial destruction of parts of the surface layer of pigment, while others have discolored and been covered by a surface efflorescence of calcium salts. In each soffit of the blind arches, and not mentioned in the *Archaeologia* catalogue, are four roundels containing bust-length figures of bishops of the Church; only the inscription for St. Spyridon is legible, in the north arch. At the time of the restoration of the fabric of the church, in 1959, the later strengthening piers supporting the enlarged conch were removed and replaced by free-standing iron columns. This has revealed a number of figures from the twelfth century which were hidden at the time of the compilation of the *Archaeologia* catalogue by Mrs. Buckler, and they are, therefore, additional to her list.

On the western faces of the original transverse arch framing the conch are, respectively, the Archangel Gabriel on the north side and the Virgin on the south, forming an Annunciation composition. This is of interest in showing a segment of the

Circle of Heaven above the Virgin, with the dove of the Holy Spirit descending upon her, a symbol which, as Professor Kitzinger points out, appears to be confined to the Sicilian mosaics in this context, apart from the Cypriote examples.<sup>4</sup> In the ground register below the Virgin is St. Zosimus, and in a corresponding position below the Archangel is St. Maria the Egyptian; Zosimus is in the act of administering Communion to her.

Below the Birth of the Virgin in the ground register of the north wall of the northeast blind arch are two standing figures with a rectangular niche between them. To the west of the niche is St. Romanos, but the figure to the east of the niche is almost totally destroyed.<sup>5</sup> There is now no sign of a figure within the niche, as seems to have been indicated by Mrs. Buckler. On the east face of the arch is a round arched niche representing the Prothesis, in which is depicted a half-length figure of St. John the Almoner. On the west face is the standing figure of St. Tichikos.

Below the Presentation of the Virgin in the ground register of the south wall of the southeast arch are two standing figures with a rectangular niche between them which is rather larger than the corresponding one on the north wall. To the east of the niche is St. Gregory of Nyssa while to the west is a youthful saint in the habit of a deacon. He swings a censer with his right hand and holds a crayon in his left hand. The shortened form  and the letter Δ are all that remain of the inscription. The figure of the Christ Emmanuel which was dismounted from a supporting pier of the conch when the piers were removed is now in the rectangular niche. Behind it are traces of decorative patterns, but no sign of the figure within it as recorded by Mrs. Buckler. On the east face of the arch is a round arched niche repre-

<sup>4</sup> E. Kitzinger, "Norman Sicily as a Source of Byzantine Influence on Western Art in the Twelfth Century," *Byzantine Art, an European Art* (Athens, 1966), p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> M. Sacopoulou, *op. cit.*, p. 20, is incorrect in stating that the figures of SS. Romanos and Gregory have been repainted. Both have suffered badly from the infiltration of harmful salts, but there is no trace whatsoever of repainting.



senting the Diaconicon, in which is depicted a half-length figure of a bishop with the letters ΤΡΙΦ clearly readable. Mr. Stylianou gives the attribution of St. Tryfillius.<sup>6</sup> On the west face of the arch is a standing figure of St. James, the Brother of the Lord. Above the southeast and northeast arches, occupying the narrower parts of the spandrels, were pairs of saints in roundels, not listed by Mrs. Buckler. On the south side are St. Tikon and a saint covered by the later extension of the conch. On the north side are St. Lazarus, covered except for his name by the extension of the conch, and a bearded bishop.

In the conch is a standing figure of the Virgin with the epithet παντασσα, flanked on either side by an archangel (figs. 13, 14, 15). On the vertical face of the arch of the conch are scenes of Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac, and a half-length figure of St. John of Damascus; the latter not listed in the *Archaeologia* catalogue. These paintings are perhaps of the period when the repair of the church was carried out. Stylistically and in coloring they are very different from the twelfth-century work, and when scaffolds are mounted in the coming year for work in the nave and narthex, it should be possible to decide whether or not the decoration of the conch is of a piece with the rest of the paintings.

Below the conch in the apse is further twelfth-century work showing, in the middle register, the Communion of the Apostles and, in the ground register, six full-length figures of the Bishops of the Church. On the north side are SS. Dionysios the Areopagite, Gregory the Theologian, and Basil; on the south side are SS. John Chrysostom, Nicholas, and Ignatios Theophoros. In the center of the ground register below the east windows, and again additional to the *Archaeologia* catalogue, were two half-length figures painted as an icon hung on the wall, of whom one, St. Epiphanius, is in reasonable condition and retains his name. The other was almost certainly St. Barnabas, since these two Cypriote bishops commonly occupy this place of honor in the apse; little remains of the second figure.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A. and J. Stylianou, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> M. Sacopoulo, *op. cit.*, p. 84, is incorrect in stating that there were three figures here.

The twelfth-century paintings were in very blackened condition in contrast to the later work which is relatively free from dirt, and this is perhaps an indication that the church was well used in the early years of its existence, but was little used from a period dating shortly after its redecoration until the present time.

The plaster of the twelfth-century work is in a single layer perhaps averaging between one and two centimeters in thickness, but varying greatly according to the irregularities of the stonework which it covers. It contains as a binder a good proportion of small lengths of cereal stalk and husks which are probably derived from the chaff left over from the threshing of crops. No sand appears to have been used as a filler and no analysis has yet been made of a plaster sample, but it will probably be found to contain some dead lime filler. The single rendering of plaster has resulted in the chaff binder appearing at the surface as the painter trowelled it to a smooth finish, and wherever this has happened pigment layers have begun to peel off, since the shiny surface of the straw provides a very poor ground for the adhesion of lime based pigments. The joins between the plaster sections run for the most part along the red border lines of scenes. Large compositions such as the Pentecost of the west vault and the Koimesis of the west wall show no evidence of a division into two renderings, but the Ascension scene has one horizontal plaster join on the south side, running through the tips of the trees, and there may have been an equivalent join through the area now lost on the north side. The pattern of plaster joins equating with the border of scenes represents standard Byzantine practice and the composition of the plaster is similar to that in other Byzantine churches of the period.

The only areas where preliminary drawing showed at all were in the west bay of the naos at the curve of the vault where pigment layers have fractured and peeled off, presumably as the deformation of the vault occurred. Here, red brushwork in watery color was revealed, and the lack of body in the pigment suggests that the painter made his drawing in a water or lime water medium on the fresh plaster.

Cleaning of the twelfth-century work has revealed the high quality of the painting, and in some places the colors have retained all of their original freshness. The analysis of paint samples has not yet been carried out, but the range of colors used by the painters is not great and appears to comprise the usual primary colors: red, yellow, blue, green, black, and white. A second orange-red is also present but used very sparingly. The quality of the pigments is good, as might be expected from an island rich in the raw materials for the making of most of them, and combinations of the basic pigments produced a sufficient variety of color for the normal Byzantine decorative system. Additionally, the painter made a sparing use of gold for the halo of Christ and for His clavus.

Where he was depicting garments such as the chiton and himation, the painter used, for the most part, a three-tone system consisting of the pigment by itself, a darker tone made of the same pigment mixed with black, and a lighter tone made of the pigment mixed with white; to these color tones he was able to add pure black for outlines and deep shadow lines, and pure white for the high lights. The different tones are quite separate from one another and they are built on top of one another with a liberal admixture of lime in all the light colors.

Three points about the painter's methods of handling garments are of interest in that they affect the stylistic appearance of his work, although they should not be taken as characteristic only of the Asinou master. First, he was aware of the fact that light colors give an impression of nearness to the eye, whereas darker colors are recessive. This is exemplified in garments where the painter had at his disposal three tones of a single color, plus black and white, but used the middle and darker tones plus black lines and occasional grey high lights in the recessed areas, and the middle and lighter tones plus white high lights for the forward areas. The difference between the two areas is not used primarily to represent the contours of the body beneath the clothing, but rather to enhance the pattern of line and color made by the clothing. This can be seen in numerous figures where the darker areas comprise

clothing over parts of the body which anatomically could not be other than in the foreground.

Second, the Asinou painter knew how to manipulate his high lights by varying the quantity of white pigment in his brush. He drew his high-light lines and high-light areas partly with a well charged brush and partly with a weakly charged brush. The result of this is a certain illusion of depth in some of the figures, created by the graduating of the white from a pure color where it is thickest, to a transparent wash where it is thinnest, with the color beneath partially showing through it. Essentially it is the softening of the linear effect in favor of a blending of color that enhances the impression of volume.

Third, the paintings were made very quickly and probably the whole decoration of the church was completed in one short season. The positive signs of speed are to be seen in outlines which seldom follow exactly the areas that they are supposed to delineate; in careless drops of paint from a fully charged brush which the painter has neglected to wipe off; and in occasional passages in which he has hardly bothered to put in color at all. The best example of this is in the feet of the attendants in the Presentation of the Virgin, where the painter has outlined the shoes, but only dabbed in a small quantity of red within each outline, so that half of the area of shoe shows the green ground which should have been blocked out by the red; probably he had finished his pot of red paint and could not be bothered to make more. The general appearance of the brush strokes is also incompatible with slow and painstaking work. In particular there is great dash and verve in the white high-lighting of the seated apostles in the Scene of the Last Supper.

The faces are the only areas of coloring which show a positive effort to blend colors and reduce contrasts in tone, and they show no sign of hurried workmanship. Finer brushes must have been used to build up and blend in the various tones of color to a soft rounded surface in which it is not at all easy to pick out single brush strokes. Because of the blended color effects it is impossible to distinguish the number of tones used in the coloring of the flesh, but it is clear

that the lighter yellow and cream colored areas were built up over a greenish ground which is left exposed in the shaded areas of the face. The feature lines are of the characteristic Byzantine type and call for no special comment except that in the case of old men a concession is made to reality by giving the eyebrows a touch or two of grey to diversify the usual single brown line.

The later paintings in the enlarged conch of the apse are on a single rendering of plaster. At the bottom edges on each side the new plaster overlaps the twelfth-century inscription in a most untidy fashion and the edges have hardly been trimmed at all. At the bottom center the plaster was wiped back onto the masonry of the wall itself showing that a part, if not all, of the twelfth-century painting had fallen away before the repair and reconstruction. No analysis of the plaster has as yet been made, but it contains a good admixture of a straw or chaff binder and it appears not to have any sand filler.

In building up the coloring of the clothing of the archangels the painter of the conch used the three-tone system plus black and white, just as did his twelfth-century predecessor, but his manipulation of the colors tended toward a very different result. Where the twelfth-century master built up his colors into patterns of elegant curving lines symbolizing parts of the body and their movements, the master of the conch built his colors into angular and unquiet patterns, partly based on the older symbolic system, and partly in imitation of natural movement. Elsewhere for clothing he uses only two tones or two different colors, as, for example, in the robe of the Virgin which is blue with black fold lines and outlines, and in her cloak which is a brownish purple with hatched yellow high lights.

The faces of the Virgin and the archangels are also built up, as far as can be seen, in the same colors used by the twelfth-century painter. However, their methods may have

been different, and the small hatched brush strokes which are apparent in these faces perhaps indicate the use of an egg tempera for the application of the pigments. One outstanding feature of the master of the conch is his unashamed carelessness about anything approaching a neat finish to his work. The most notable example of this is in the decoration of the footstool of the Virgin where the painted red jewels and white pearls have been put in with a brush overcharged with too liquid a color. The inevitable result was that in each case the paint dripped downward instead of staying within the area in which it was applied; and so it remains, without any effort having been made to wipe off the overflow lines.

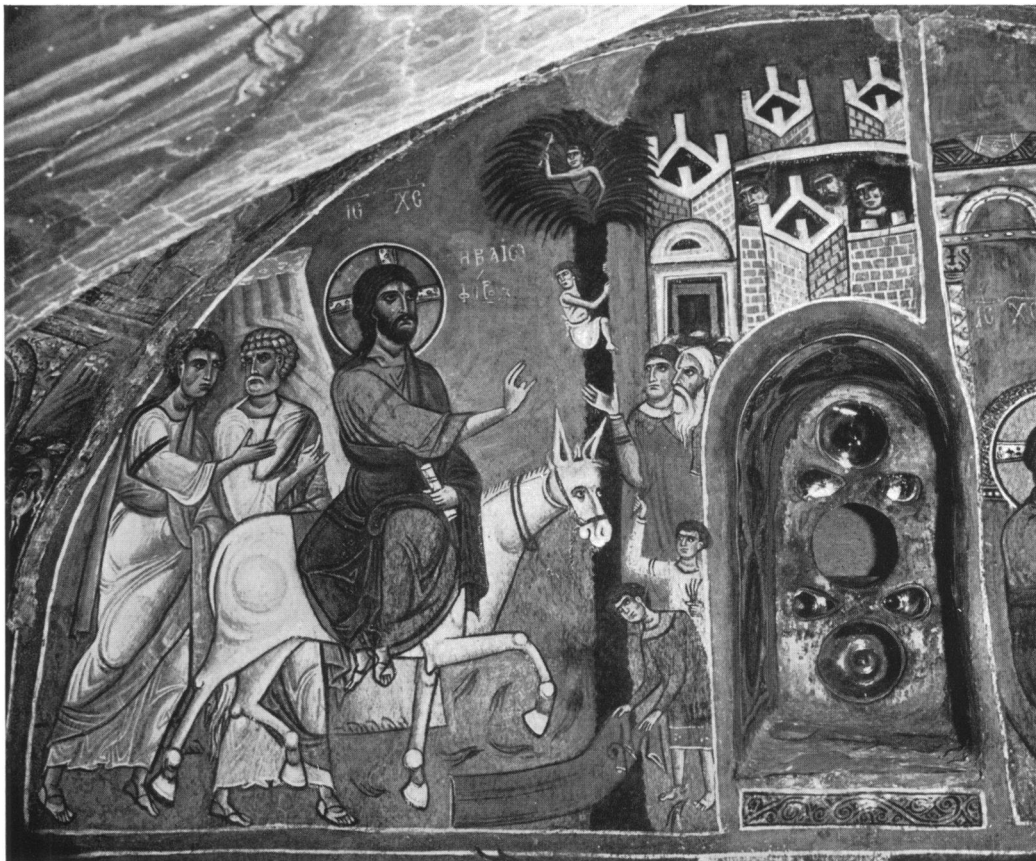
For the master of the conch, it would be out of place to begin to compare his work with that found in other churches, since the remaining paintings of the nave and narthex at Asinou have first to be cleaned and studied in their relation to those of the conch. But, for the twelfth-century master, some preliminary remarks may be recorded. The Curator of Monuments, Mr. Papageorgiou, pointed out in a communication to the Oxford Congress the close relationship between the twelfth-century Asinou paintings, and the paintings recently cleaned at Trikomo. In addition to this, we think it possible that the same master worked at least in the western part of the nave at Saint Chrysostomos, where the paintings have been partially cleaned, and that the paintings of the southwest corner of the church of Saint Nicholas of the Roof are by a closely related hand. The greater delicacy of line at Saint Nicholas suggests either that these might be late paintings by the same master, or the work of a pupil. Thus, we have a series of closely related paintings in four Cypriote churches, and detailed study of the relationships between them should contribute much to our knowledge of the way in which Byzantine painters worked.



1. Exterior, from Southwest



2. West Bay, Vault, South Side. The Raising of Lazarus  
Cyprus, Asinou, Church of Our Lady



3. West Wall, Lunette, South Half. The Entry into Jerusalem



4. Detail of Figure 3

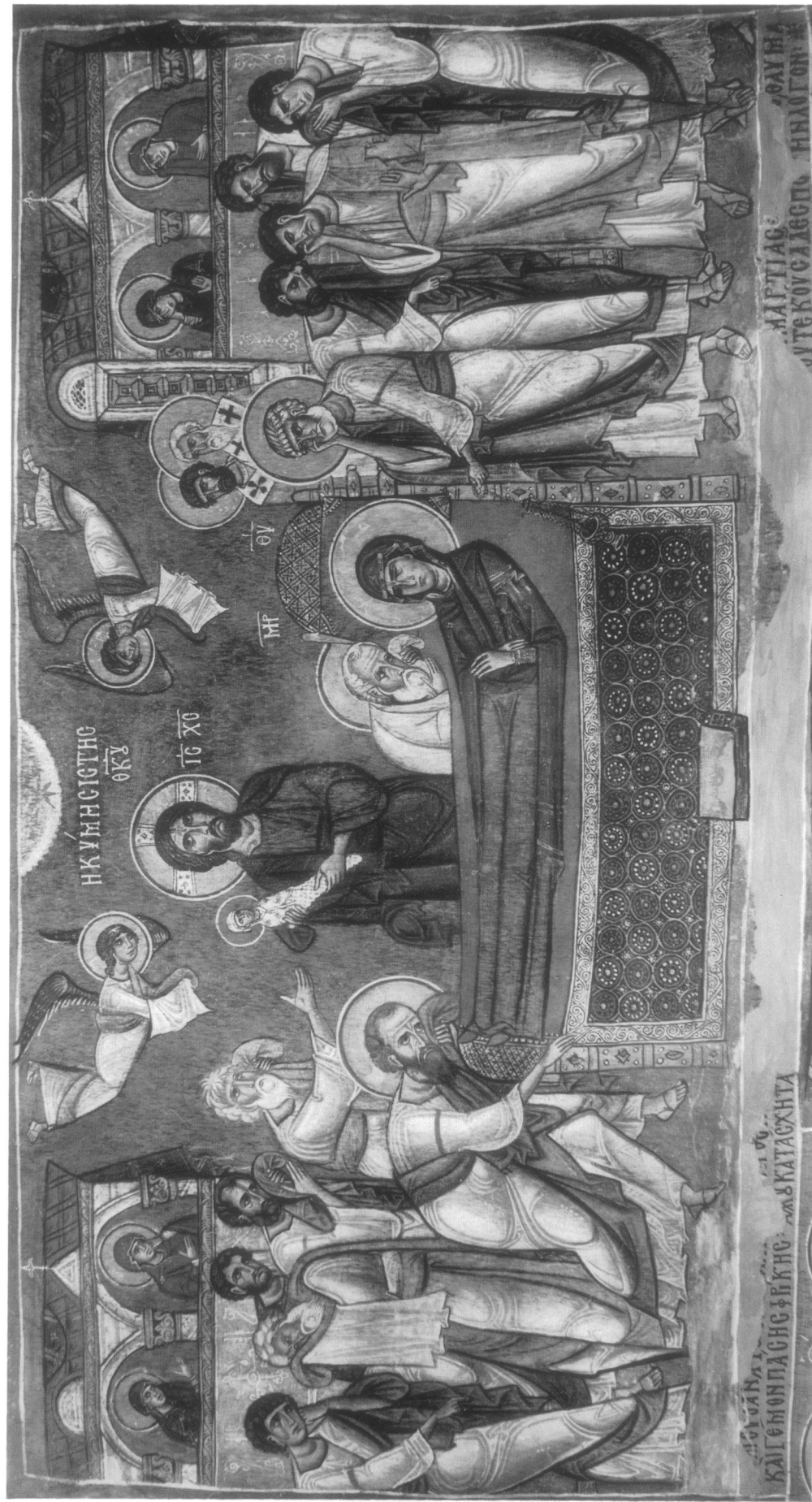




5. West Wall, Lunette, North Half. The Last Supper



6. Detail of Figure 5



7. West Wall, Middle Register. The Koimesis



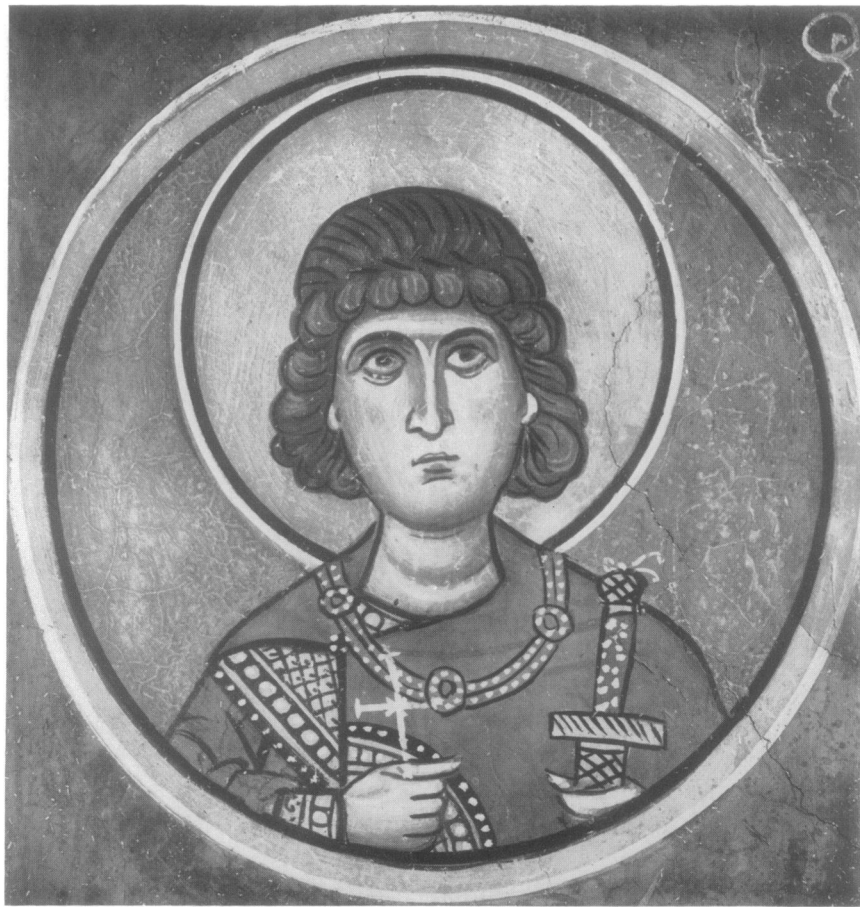
8. The Forty Martyrs (before cleaning)



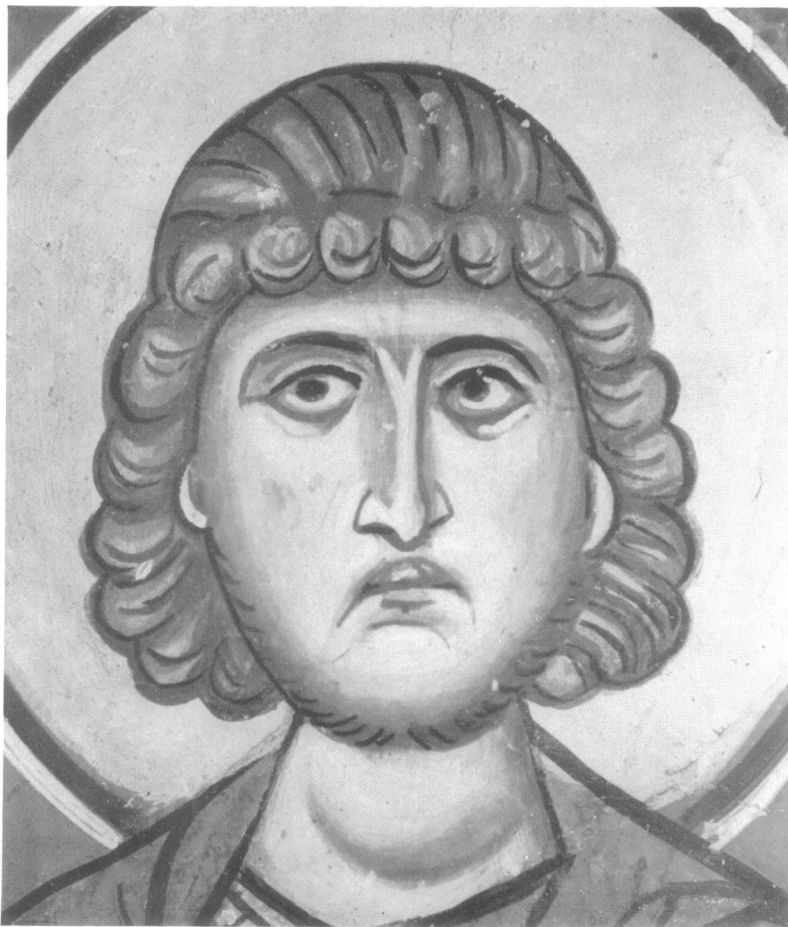
9. Same as Figure 8 (after cleaning)

Northwest Blind Arch, North Wall.





10. St. Sergios



11. St. Lavros, detail  
Southwest Blind Arch, Soffit



12. Southwest Blind Arch, South Wall, Lunette. SS. Constantine and Helena, with Donor's Inscription beneath



13. Apse, Conch. The Virgin Flanked by Archangels, detail



14. Before cleaning



15. Same as Figure 14. After cleaning  
Apse, Conch. The Virgin flanked by Archangels